



Parry, Becky (2015) Reading ads, reading the world.  
Education 3-13, 44 (3). pp. 325-338. ISSN 1475-7575

**Access from the University of Nottingham repository:**

<http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/40171/3/Readings%20Ads%20Revision%20BP.pdf>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Nottingham ePrints service makes this work by researchers of the University of Nottingham available open access under the following conditions.

This article is made available under the University of Nottingham End User licence and may be reused according to the conditions of the licence. For more details see:  
[http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/end\\_user\\_agreement.pdf](http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/end_user_agreement.pdf)

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the repository url above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact [eprints@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@nottingham.ac.uk)

In *Education 3-13* (Forthcoming)

**Title: 'Reading Ads, Reading the World'**

**Author:** Dr Becky Parry

**Abstract**

This paper challenges the reductive notion of children as 'efferent'<sup>1</sup> readers who learn to decode written language in order to 'take away' knowledge. This anachronistic idea has become entrenched in current UK curriculum and education policy. However, it is well established that decoding letters and sounds is only one aspect of reading, that reading is cultural and that learning to read, not only words but also images and sounds, develops children's comprehension and criticality. With this in mind, I seek to share a process through which children and young people were able to develop as readers with a particular focus on the reading of media texts. I present an account of media education activity which focused on the way children read media texts, in the classroom. I suggest that with appropriate pedagogic and conceptual tools children develop as critical, cultural and collaborative readers of words, images, sounds and texts and thereby of the world.

Key Words: Reading, literacy, media texts, pedagogy, media studies, media education, adverts

**Introduction**

In both public and academic contexts considerable attention is paid to the ways in which children learn to read print texts. The current statutory approach to teaching reading in the UK is synthetic phonics, a method that aims to enable children to decode letter sounds before progressing to letter blends and then words (DfE, 2013):

*Skilled word reading involves both the speedy working out of the pronunciation of unfamiliar printed words (decoding) and the speedy recognition of familiar printed words. Underpinning both is the understanding that the letters on the page represent the sounds in spoken words. This is why phonics should be emphasised in the early teaching of reading to beginners (i.e. unskilled readers) when they start school.*  
(DfE, 2013 p.13)

This highly contested approach has been robustly critiqued for the way in which it focuses on sounds and symbols out of context, with too little attention being paid to meaning (Clark, 2013). As both Reedy (2012) and Wyse, (2010) demonstrate, teaching children to be able to infer meaning from texts demands much more than enabling them decode letter sounds. What is more, children today do not only read print, but an increasingly varied and complex range of texts. They learn to construct meaning, to interpret and make critical judgments – across verbal, visual and auditory media. In secondary education, in particular, a tradition of teaching young people to read media texts has evolved through the development of Media Studies. The subject of Media Studies at secondary, further and higher education is a well defined, if contested, field of study in which students are taught to analyse and create media texts and phenomena by focusing on the institutions or organisations that produced them, the audiences they were constructed for and the way in which the texts themselves represent the world (Buckingham, 2013). However, this subject and approach has had a more limited impact on the primary phase. As a consequence we know relatively little about how young children learn to read media texts, and still less about how different pedagogical

---

<sup>1</sup> A term used by Louise Rosenblatt (1938) to critique the teaching of reading which involved students in 'taking away' a particular meaning.

approaches can enable progression in learning. This paper therefore, aims to contribute to the broader understanding of children as developing readers of media texts, and the pedagogic and conceptual tools which help them.

The particular texts in focus here are television advertisements – in many respects a predictable choice. Children are, of course, surrounded by advertising in various forms, and are likely to have a well-developed understanding of how it works. Advertisements are often used in this context, partly because they are short and easy to manage in the classroom; and yet they are frequently rich and complex, presenting considerable opportunities for close analysis. However, rather than focusing on the way children do read adverts, often teaching about advertising has been informed by the desire to protect children from its perceived powerful influence upon them. This public discourse about the relationship between children and adverts is informed by research which tends to see children as lacking the capacity to recognise the intentions of adverts (Oates et al., 2003). Reflecting on a piece of practitioner action research Morgan (1998) observed that, in the media studies classroom, advertisements often become default texts used as part of a demystification approach to the study of media. Here the teacher's role would be to reveal hidden ideologies, arming children against the negative impacts of advertising. In her empirical research focused on teaching advertising in primary schools, Banaji (2010) questions this common assumption that children are more vulnerable to advertising than adults, arguing that this obscures important questions about children's 'complex cultural responses' (p.62) and potentially presents a simplistic and homogeneous account of the relationship between children and particular texts. Kenway and Bullen's (2001) description of advertising as a social narrative helps us to consider one aspect of that complex relationship:

*It [advertising] tells fictional tales about social identities and relationships, and implies that the purchase of goods will fulfil the story's promise. It inscribes goods with a 'narrative capacity' – the goods themselves are eventually seen to tell the story and thus to fulfil the fantasy. Advertisements, it seems, are not expected to fulfil their promises but rather connect to readers' fantasies about themselves and their future.*  
(Kenway and Bullen, 2001 p.)

Readers of adverts and consumers of products can, therefore, be constructed as social actors, operating with a degree of agency and this has implications for classroom practice.

Livingstone and Helsper (2006) also critique narrow notions of media literacy, in relation to adverts, as overly simplistic. Furthermore, they discern a problem with equating media literacy learning progression with the ability to resist the persuasive powers of advertising. Indeed their review of the research demonstrates that older children are better able to inscribe the brands they like with a narrative identity, as part of consuming a product, whereas the youngest children separate their experiences of the product from their engagements with the advertisements. This might suggest that as children get older they become more able to read the persuasive powers of adverts, but this does not prevent them from having affinities with the fantasy narratives of identity exuded by certain brands, adverts and products. This finding became increasingly significant as a means of understanding and comparing the readings of adverts encountered in our research with children and young people. In common with contemporary Media Studies research therefore, the classroom activities did not seek to demystify the ideology of advertising, or to inoculate children against its persuasive power. Rather, the aim was to help them systematically explore and reflect upon their cultural responses to advertising, recognising the complex and affective process involved in reading adverts.

## **The Research Project**

The data presented here derive from a larger project: 'Developing Media Literacy: Towards a Model of Learning Progression' - an ESRC funded investigation, led by David Buckingham and Andrew Burn at the University of London, Institute of Education. The project ran from January 2009 until January 2012 and was the first large-scale, systematic research project to explore the practice of media education in schools. Becky Parry (the author) and Mandy Powell undertook the programme of research. The wider project aim was to develop a model of learning progression in media education which would specify what children of different ages might be expected to understand about media; and how their learning could develop over time, and in the course of a sequence of learning activities. Some of the classroom materials from the project (including those relating to the activities described here) have recently been published by the English and Media Centre (2014)<sup>2</sup>.

The primary aim of the learning activities shared here was to gain insights into how children and young people of different ages read and make sense of media texts. I include the responses of Year 10 students in this article, despite the upper age limit of the journal, because they shed important light on the readings of the younger children aged 3-13. The key focus was on how the participants approached the texts, what they paid attention to, what questions they had about them and the ways in which they enjoyed and understood them. We also aimed to capture the primary children's first experiences of being formally taught to 'read' media texts in the classroom and the impact of different pedagogical approaches on learning. The study as a whole made use of the conceptual framework developed within secondary media education (see Buckingham, 2013) which includes a focus on the key concepts of audience, institutions, media language and representation. Therefore the analysis presented, in this paper, also considers the extent to which this framework retains its usefulness as a set of theoretical tools in order to develop critical reading of texts, for both primary and secondary learners.

### **Action Research in the Classroom**

An action research methodology was used, whereby schemes of activity were collaboratively planned by teachers and researchers and then implemented in each classroom. The precise length of time taken for each age group varied, but the primary children spent a minimum of three days focused on the activity, not necessarily consecutive days, and the secondary students dedicated three weeks worth of media lessons to the activity. This was not intended to be 'cutting edge', practice: rather, we sought to develop and research classroom activities that would be within the reach of the majority of teachers with relatively little prior training in this field. The data were collected during periods of classroom activity with children in years 2, 4, 8 and 10 and then again when the same groups were in years 3, 5, 9 and 11. The classroom activities undertaken were strongly framed and structured, in order to enable the research team to compare data across the age groups, although teachers were invited to adapt them as appropriate to their classes. The research involved classroom observations, some of which were recorded on audio or video for later analysis, as well as questionnaires and interviews at a number of stages in the project.

Prior to the start of the fieldwork, a group of focus children was identified for each class. Class teachers were asked to suggest a purposive sample of six to eight children whose experiences would vary in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, learning dispositions and social and cultural experiences. We then focused on these children and young people in particular in terms of their responses to the activities and set out to gather evidence of learning progression over the two years of the classroom research.

The data were analysed in a number of ways, including thematic coding and narrative analysis. In this account, I draw mainly on the comparisons between the four age groups,

---

<sup>2</sup> [www.englishandmedia.co.uk/publications](http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/publications)

focusing particularly on Years 2 and 4, based on transcriptions of audio recorded classroom dialogue and observational notes. Owen et al. (2007) critique research methodology which relies heavily on verbal and written expression and does not enable children to fully express the complexity of their understanding. Although a considerable amount of this activity was talk-based, some classes also produced drawn, dramatic and written responses.

### **The Activity: Reading Adverts**

Advertising increasingly proliferates across a range of media forms, although television advertising remains one of the most familiar for children. The advert selected was made for Coca Cola and is included in the 'Doing Ads' pack produced by the English and Media Centre: this award-winning one-minute ad is entitled 'The Happiness Factory'<sup>3</sup> and was broadcast in cinemas and on television in 2006. It depicts a city scene in which a young, white man puts his coin in the slot of a vending machine to buy a Coca Cola. The coin triggers a journey 'behind the scenes' and into a brightly coloured CGI animation fantasy world where small creatures bottle the Coca Cola, make it cold and send it out to the customer with a fanfare.

This text was chosen partly on the basis of its accessibility for younger children. We had noted in previous classroom observations (of children responding to media texts found in a time capsule) that, in the classroom, many Year 2 and Year 4 children paid attention predominantly to the print language in their new encounters with media texts and at times this overshadowed their reading of other textual components such as sound, image or visual design. This advert was selected because it is almost entirely a visual and aural text with very little written language. Given the strong global presence of Coca Cola, it was anticipated that all the age groups would have previous experience (both of the advertising and of the product itself) which they might usefully draw on in the activities.

In the first full viewing of the advert we were keen to elicit personal and initial responses and used the 'Tell Me' approach (Chambers, 1997). Chambers' approach, developed for shared reading of print texts, highlights the need to enable children to talk spontaneously about what they like, what puzzles them and what patterns they can see in relation to other texts they have encountered. The subsequent activities were structured as follows:

- Each class was asked to undertake a sharing of ideas associated with images and artefacts of the Coca-Cola brand.
- Each group listened to the advert soundtrack and discussed what they could hear.
- Each group then watched the entire advert and discussed their initial responses.
- Each group then analysed freeze frames from key moments, paying particular attention to visual details.

This sequence of activities adopts a pedagogic strategy that is very familiar in secondary media education. It entails a process of 'deconstruction', whereby the different 'modes' of a text (sound, image, verbal language, and so on) are systematically isolated and analysed using a broadly semiotic approach (see Hodge and Kress, 1998). Students are encouraged to pay close attention to detail, viewing the text repeatedly and considering the various

choices available to the producers and their connotations and consequences in terms of meaning. At the same time, the activities encourage students to 'scope outwards' from the text, to consider the broader context. In this respect, much of the questioning and discussion focused on the Media Studies key concepts of *institution*, *representation* and *audience*. Thus, students were asked to consider issues such as: 'Who made the advert?' 'What and who is it for?' and 'How does it represent people or places?'

### **Sharing: What does Coca-Cola mean to you?**

In the initial activity the children were asked to share their existing associations with the Coca Cola brand. Unsurprisingly, many of the children rehearsed arguments about health and obesity – arguments that are now routinely promoted in schools (see Evans et al., 2008). Several of the Year 2 and 4 children described Coca Cola as unhealthy for children, being high in sugar and causing children to be 'hyper'. In one, middle-class school, very few of the Year 2 children had even been allowed to try Coca Cola. Yet while the children listed these health concerns, they simultaneously made enthusiastic associations with strong fantasy narratives Christmas, holidays and football. As one girl, a Year 10 Media Studies student, stated: 'It's not Christmas until the ad comes on'.

The older students (especially in Year 10) talked knowledgeably about the company's global dominance in the soft drinks market, its brand merchandise and synergy with McDonald's, at the same time evoking nostalgic memories of childhood. In particular they enjoyed sharing urban myths about Coca Cola and memories of other similar Coca Cola adverts. Additionally, Year 8 and 10 students shared knowledge of and pleasure in the brand's cultural and advertising history, describing how it was a nineteenth century product originally manufactured as a medicine, how the dominant colours signifying Christmas changed from green and white to red and white, and its association with the World Cup. Their awareness of the 'anti' Coca Cola perspective, alongside their personal affinity is again nicely summed up by another Year 10 student: 'I know it's bad for you but I love it. I could just drink one now!' As this implies, the older students could knowingly recite health-related discourses about Coca Cola, whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from them and deploying alternative associations – a process that was also apparent (although less explicitly so) with some of the younger children.

In this activity the teachers were careful to avoid cuing or eliciting particular responses to the advert, which Morgan (1998) argues is common to the demystification approach. The activity had been planned as an open and exploratory discussion, and the teachers were urged to resist the temptation to formulate the children's diverse responses into a single argument. This was not always easy, some teachers listed similar and different responses, or categorised them as positive and negative ideas, but still made space on the white board for ideas that did not quite fit in with these categories before moving on to the next activity. Resisting a desire to formulate a cohesive group or class response was a critical pedagogic strategy which ensured that both healthy food discourses and personal affective responses could be further explored.

Valuing the children's extensive 'funds of knowledge' (González et al., 2013) about the brand, the ways in which it is promoted, and the criticisms that are often made of it was also critical to the success of the activity. The sharing of associations created useful connections to everyday knowledge and experiences beyond the classroom, a principle Lingard (2005) regards as central to ensuring pedagogy is productive and socially just. This foregrounding and mapping of ideas became a key reference point, reified as an interactive white board slide, which the children often referred back to later in the activity. For example, the references to watching sport on television later helped the children make links between brands and sponsorship clearly also constructing a narrative about the lives of footballers:

*Ethan (Year 4): Manchester – many people drink Coca Cola when they are out and about. Football players at Manchester United – that's their representative drink.*

Equally, however, there were occasions where the ideas the children referred to were excluded or ignored by teachers, apparently on the grounds that they were irrelevant or a distraction from the main narrative of the lesson. We perceived that some opportunities were missed here, and that it was important for teachers to include ideas even when they could not see their relevance or the connections to broader issues, as these could potentially unfold much later in the process.

### **Responding to the Different Modes as Units of Meaning**

Having begun with a relatively open and spontaneous sharing of ideas, each class then moved on to a more systematic approach to reading a particular advert. During the process of close analysis, it was evident that the children's broader repertoires of experience of reading media texts helped them to engage with new ones (Robinson, 1997). I observed the children drawing on previous experiences in order to make sense of the different modes (sound, music, visual design, and so on), combining these to make sense of the entire text. Thus, in focusing initially on the sound of the advert in isolation, the children could hear and describe an extraordinary range of distinct elements and make inferences about what these elements might mean. The Year 2 and 4 children, for example, could hear bells, chimes, birds and whales (under water), and they linked these to popular narratives such as 'Harry Potter', 'adventure', 'Polar Express' and 'cops and robbers'. Here, the children were relating the sounds they were hearing to familiar media texts and drawing on their memories of and associations with these texts to help them make inferences.

Making a space for an exploration of affect appears to have enhanced the children's opportunity to engage with the sound activity. Responding to the question 'How does it [the sound] make you feel?' one Year 2 child said the sound made him feel 'jingly'. For this child, listening closely to the sound in isolation made it possible for him to engage with his own affective response and begin to articulate a deeper understanding of the brand's association with Christmas. It was also interesting to observe incidences where a more developed knowledge of music (in this case) enabled a more explicit and precise analysis, and a meaningful use of a media vocabulary:

*Gina (Year 8): Can I just say something about the music? They were in like soft major chords which makes more of a happy feel. And the xylophone over the top was like the melody over the major chords.*

The younger children's responses were mostly more impressionistic than this, but they nevertheless drew on comparisons with other texts to express an intuitive recognition of how particular affective associations were established. However, where a student had a grasp of specialist knowledge and vocabulary, they were able to progress beyond identification of a relationship between the music and the moving image, towards an understanding of how and why this affect is produced. In terms of pedagogy, this points to the need to value students' existing funds of knowledge (González et al., 2013) but also to the importance of acquiring a metalanguage and a range of analytical tools with which to examine the compositional elements of the text and, clearly, both aspects are vital in teaching reading of all kinds of texts.

Separating the modes (in this case the sound and the moving images) for the purposes of analysis and then putting them back together, proved highly productive. However, in some cases 'putting it back together' resulted in the teachers' reading becoming the dominant one.

Where the teachers resisted moving quickly towards a summary of the classes' responses or even their own reading of the advert, a more exploratory approach unfolded. Far from being a chaotic or laissez faire process, this exploration became increasingly methodical and systematic as the children's curiosity was driven by their own sets of questions.

### **Responding to the Whole Text**

In their initial responses to the first full viewing, the primary children were asked what they liked and disliked. The text clearly had a greater appeal to the younger children, and therefore Years 2 and 4 expressed more interest in the analysis. For example at the end of the advert there is a celebratory parade of circus type characters juggling and doing acrobatics accompanied by lively music. This parade launches the bottle of drink into the world and there was evidence that this party-like narrative resonated with the younger learners, tapping into their current cultural affiliations with films which end in a celebratory style. In one Year 2 class, the whole class insisted that a boy who had missed viewing the advert whilst at a piano lesson should see it. At playtime, as they put on their coats, they discussed and planned to 'play' the advert outside. The younger children's enthusiasm about the text also contributed to their reading of it. They paid attention, looked closely at details, listened attentively, asked for repeat viewings and were keen to share their responses with their peers. All of these actions are clearly useful approaches to reading and rereading a text, extending understanding and exploring personal response.

Pleasurable texts clearly have an important pedagogic function, enabling children to perform active reading. Teachers' anxieties about working with media and popular culture texts in the classroom (Lambirth, 2003) act as a barrier to what is clearly a valuable literacy activity. Similarly, a group of parents in one site expressed concern about the idea of studying an advert, a concern which was dealt with by sharing with them the very interesting ways in which their children were reading the adverts. The 'Tell Me' approach, which invites exploration of pleasure, also enabled the students to generate questions about the text independently. Asking if anything puzzled them or if they had any questions, also generated an interesting set of responses and represented a shift away from the 'cued elicitation' or 'guess what's in teacher's head' approach to questioning we had been keen to avoid:

*Leon: I wonder why the little guys in the cannons put candles on their heads?*

*Ameena: Why do the little creatures kiss the bottle for no reason?*

*Sam: Why does he look backwards?*

*Chris: I looked closely and wondered why the [creature's] eyes were where their mouths should be.*

*Amina: I was confused because it was snowy and then the rocket fired it, but it still felt cold when the man drank it.*

*Lilly: I was confused why the bee had a tattoo.*

The questions the children were encouraged to ask of the text prompted them to pay close attention to details, and again to move beyond identification of key features. Lilly's observation about why the bee has a tattoo led the children to review their initial reading of the animation as 'cute' and 'funny.' They began to see things which did not fit: for example, they spotted a 'gold-toothed gangster' and a 'heart tattoo' and compared these to their earlier ideas about Coca Cola. By comparison with the associations with fun, adventure, magic and sport the details they noticed troubled them. Many started to see transgression – deeming the advert not suitable for younger children. Far from being tutored to adopt the interpretation of the teacher, the children and teacher entered into a dialogue, simultaneously noticing different elements and questioning why they were there. The level of engagement was extremely high with each child scrutinising the details. The children increasingly paid attention to the unexpected elements of the text and they shuttled between



their initial reading and subsequent readings of the advert, productively addressing their own question: 'but why would 'they' [Coca-Cola] do this?' Attempting to answer this question occasionally led them up blind alleys, but this proved to be a productive part of the process too. For example, if one child noticed a detail the others would review whether or not this detail fitted with their new understanding of the text. For the older students, perhaps because the advert held less appeal for them, this level of analysis was not in evidence until they undertook the freeze frame activity.

### **Freeze Frame Analysis**

Interesting contrasts between the year groups emerged in their analysis of the selection of individual frames. Close attention to the mis-en-scene enabled the younger children to pursue their particular readings of the whole text as they were apparent in one particular shot – again they strived to construct narrative relationships between key elements:

*Y2: Lady in a pretty dress, man in a suit. Their clothes are orange and yellow and a bit of red ... I think they are celebrating because they made Coca Cola*

*Y4: Reminds me of pirates and they're shooting a cannon ... it reminds me of a parade*

Year 10 GCSE Media Studies students could draw on specialist vocabulary and previous experiences of textual analysis to help them formulate and even parody teacher-style questions:

*Ruth: What do you think of the costumes and what do they 'iconically' represent? [Iconically was pronounced in an exaggerated and pretentious tone with the use of hand gestures to signify quotation and irony.]*

However, students across the age groups were increasingly motivated to generate their own questions based on their close observations of individual freeze frames of shots:

*Ruth: Hang on, what is that? What is that on its tail?*

*Ariane: They look cold, they look like little ice things.*

*Ruth: That's what I thought when I first saw them. They look kind of dry and like ice cold.*

*Ruth: Look, what is that little tail, they have a little poodle thing, they have collars [marked surprise]. Oh my God they have collars. No Richard, I want to prove a point here [rewinding DVD]. Look, they have little collars. I'm not even joking.*

Paying close attention to the text was productive, but there was a need for the further interrogation. The younger children were prompted to pursue this because of their surprise that Coca Cola would advertise in this way. However, the older students may have benefited from questions which enabled them to link observation to possible interpretation: Why, for example, do they have a collar? Why not something else? Why did the producers of this text make such a choice? What kind of audience responses did they intend to produce? How might this contribute to the construction of a 'brand identity'? The intention was not to cue or elicit specific responses, but to connect the students' observations to conceptual tools of analysis. However, for some classes, in the absence of any pedagogic interventions, this broader analysis was largely absent. Enabling a dialogic engagement with a text requires high-level skills on the part of the teachers, particularly in prompting the students to develop and question their own ideas. At times, a potentially interesting comment was left suspended in mid-air with nowhere to go signalled by a 'good' which moved swiftly on to the next contribution. Sometimes this seemed to be because the teacher wanted to draw back from influencing the students' responses. Equally, however, dialogues were closed down because the teacher announced a 'closed' reading of the text:

*It's all a bit artificial.  
It reminds me of the film 'Alien'.*

This highlighted the teachers' struggles to find ways of being collaborators in a collective process of meaning-making, without dispensing with their own expertise or authority. And of course, much more mundane but important factors such as limited time and the difficulties of managing large classes impacted on the extent to which ideas could be productively debated. However, a more interrogatory approach informed by the key concepts of media studies usefully contributed to students' meaning-making in the plenary discussions for most classes.

## **The Plenary**

At the end of this unit of work the advert was discussed using a number of prompts which explicitly related to the Media Studies key concepts of audience, representation and institution. Some learners in Years 2 and 4 and most in Years 8 and 10 expressed their understanding of the function of the creatures in terms of the persuasive purpose of advertising:

*Y2: To try to make us buy it.*

*Y8: They're doing this to persuade you to buy it.*

The question of what the advert is trying to sell also provoked comparatively reductive responses. Year 2 children, when asked about the purpose of an advert, responded:

*Nicola: They want you to buy something?*

*Luke: They want to make money?*

Asking the children who the advert was designed for generated some rather more varied responses from Year 4 children:

*Ben: Older children.*

*Amina: Adults might tell off children for watching it 'cause it could scare the babies.*

*Teacher: Luke, you thought adults could watch it - wouldn't they enjoy it as much?*

*Luke: No they would [imitates snoring].*

This was very different to their initial ideas about audiences, reflecting their re-reading of the text in the light of close analysis. The differences are a productive aspect of pedagogy, encouraging the children to provide evidence for their own suggestions.

The Year 4 children were also confident in articulating what they saw as the main feature of the advert, the narrative and how it might appeal to the audience:

*Ben: Children will like the idea of a world making Coca Cola – it will grab their attention.*

Here Ben demonstrates his recognition that children's texts often include a 'fictional world' because children 'like' that idea. That is to say, he makes a wider generalisation about narratives for children, recognising that the makers have used this idea to 'grab children's attention.'

Banaji (2010) makes a distinction between children having a general understanding of the intention of advertising to persuade and a more detailed understanding of the complex

institutional or industrial relationships that go into the production of advertising. She describes the children in her study (aged 8-10) 'intermittently' displaying a 'sophisticated critical understanding' of these aspects. Similarly here, in Year 4, some children outlined a complex view of institutions, for example imagining the production company differently from the company which manufactures Coca Cola:

*Freddie: this company [who have created the advert] might be new and they want everyone to take notice of their advert so they can get very successful in what they are working on.*

What is more, children across the age groups were increasingly able to articulate their understanding of the broader social narrative associated with the Coca Cola brand. Thus, one year eight student suggested that:

*It's metaphorically showing you how it's made.*

Clearly, the older students were able to recognise and articulate a 'metaphorical' or symbolic function to the narrative. In one Year 8 site the teacher asked the students to consider the advert, by contrasting it to another possible approach to advertising:

*Teacher: Why not just 'Buy a Coca Cola?'*

*Joe: That would be annoying and you might even be put off.*

*Teacher: What are they selling?*

*Sara: Selling the 'magical' life style.*

Here, the student succinctly refers to the fantasy narratives associated with Coca Cola (Disney, Christmas and magic) but equally highlights the ways in which these ideas are being linked to a 'life style' an identity which is encoded into the brand. The very youngest children also recognised that the advert incorporates a 'mini land' or 'fantasy' world that is contrasted with a representation of a 'real' world. They also expressed complex ideas about modality (here referring to the way the text relates to or represents the real or everyday) in relation to this advert:

*Ollie: It isn't real because it is too fun. Some things that are fun are not true.*

*Henry: It could be true in a story.*

Just as they do in their dramatic play the children were clearly able to step into and out of the fictional space of the advert and in this instance suggest that the idea could be 'true' within the diegetic space of the story – that is to say something within the text can be authentic within that particular fictional or animated world (even if it is a strongly fantastical element). However, this recognition also prompts them to make comparisons and challenge the way an idea is being represented:

*Luke: Coca Cola isn't really made like that because little creatures don't exist, but they based it on ideas from a factory.*

Year 10, from a school site which served an ethnically diverse and working class area, also considered the representation of an urban street in the advert, comparing it to their own locality:

*Ellie: There's never a vending-machine just randomly put somewhere.*

*Sarah: The parade [their local shops] isn't good enough for a Coca Cola vending machine.*

This worked as something of a provocation for two other students:

*Joe: Vending machines are in hospitals, malls, leisure centres, hotels, swimming baths, everywhere. The vending machine doesn't matter. You can walk into any shop and it'll sell Coca-Cola ... wherever it is, it'll sell Coca Cola.*

*Charlotte: If the point of locating the machine in a city is intended to communicate that other locations aren't good enough, it would undermine the point of advertising. If the purpose of advertising is to promote a product but audiences get the message the product isn't for them, what's the point in spending the money?*

*Sarah: Audiences wouldn't notice because the ad goes by so quickly. I only notice because I'm freezing the frame.*

Likewise, Banaji (2010) found that a focus on representations of a 'white middle class' family in the OXO adverts generated considerable debate among children from a more culturally diverse, working class background. The children's instantly critical stance towards the adverts was not expected; and this prompted the teachers to justify the adverts, just as they would encourage children to engage with a culturally valued novel or poem. This further highlights the need, proposed by Burnett (2013), to question the influence of the classroom as a specific institutional space for reading media<sup>4</sup> texts which children also enjoy at home, and the teacher's role in selecting and valuing some texts over others. Whilst pleasure is clearly an important aspect of reading a text, the theoretical tools of analysis are key to ensuring that students are able to reflect upon and further debate their own personal responses to texts. Where children's own observations were linked to questions about audience, producer and representation, their readings demonstrated increasing criticality. That is to say they questioned their own assumptions and previous readings, compared a fictional representation to their own every day context, considered authorial intent and brand identity and inferred meaning by paying close attention to detail. These are reading skills which potentially relate to any text, in any media and situate reading as an authentic activity (rather than one which serves a utilitarian need to access a curriculum or pass a test).

## **Conclusion**

Choosing to read a multimodal text in the classroom enabled young children, some of whom were not yet reading print texts, to demonstrate their ability to make inferences and to construct meaning – that is to say, draw on their knowledge of the world. Teaching children to read a popular and engaging multimodal text generated a motivated and collaborative process through which they sought to satisfy their curiosity about the meaning of the advert. The open-ended, exploratory approach taken by many of the teachers enabled the children to hypothesise about meaning, without the limiting intrusion of a domineering 'preferred' reading. Making space for affective responses to the text was particularly important for the younger children, motivating them to fully engage in the reading and pay attention to specific details. Similarly, a space for 'random' or 'blind alley' responses helped the younger children assimilate or accommodate new ideas into their own reading of the advert. Indeed the more random they were, the more the children were able to reject them from their overall reading of the advert.

As suggested earlier we observed primary children, in the classroom context, focusing on decoding written language when encountering new texts, even where these were largely image based. This is not surprising given the primary value the written word is afforded in the curriculum and the classroom. However, paying attention to all the modes of texts and considering connotations of sound, music and image were all useful to the process of

---

<sup>4</sup> Burnett refers to 'digital texts'.

making sense of this advert. Similarly useful was the toolkit provided by media studies key concepts. This took the form of questions reflecting on the institutional intentions and audience responses as well as how the world was being represented in the advert. Linking these questions back to the text and other texts helped to move children beyond a reductive observation of persuasive intent towards an unpacking of the social narrative and or brand identity associated with Coca Cola and encoded in this advert in particular. Although media studies is often undervalued in wider education discourses, it is clear that the core conceptual framework and pedagogic practices associated with the subject facilitate meaning making and enrich the repertoire of strategies children and young people can draw in their reading. In particular it enables children to make connections between their reading of a specific text and the wider social and cultural context in which the text was made and consumed.

The data and the interpretations shared here, relate to the analysis of a multimodal media text. However, the findings are pertinent to children's reading across media and mode and including print texts. That is to say, children develop skills as readers holistically; if they are able to make inferences from an image they have the potential to apply these skills to the written word. However, if the focus of most of the reading undertaken in classrooms is on decoding letters and sounds rather than on meaning, then inference making or comprehension is potentially subjugated and neglected. We saw the impact of this where in the classroom children read aloud the written word, sounding out letters, with no reference to the pictures in texts such as comics and film posters. It is not only by reading the word that we 'read the world' (Freire and Macedo, 1987) but through cultural artefacts and phenomena in many media. Teaching children to read involves teaching reading of the image, long the friend of the emerging reader, as well as teaching to them to read sound, music, editing and indeed all the modes which comprise contemporary texts. Reading consequently becomes authentic; not decoding one curriculum-defined meaning, but investigating many meanings, and in doing so reminding ourselves that reading is intrinsically cultural and social. Moreover, that the pedagogical strategies and theoretical tools provided by the media studies conceptual framework, clearly enables children to read and re-read collaboratively - pushing at the boundaries of the classroom context. Recognising reading as multimodal meaning-making in a social, historical, economic and cultural context enables the reader to go beyond decoding a specific text, towards developing the critical, cultural and creative readers of the world.

## References

Banaji, S. (2010) *Analysing Advertisements in the Classroom*. in (Ed) Bazalgette, C. *Teaching Media in Primary Schools*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli, Singapore: Sage

Buckingham, D. (2013). *Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture*. John Wiley & Sons.

Burnett, C. (2013) Investigating children's interactions around digital texts in classrooms: how are these framed and what counts? *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*. Taylor and Francis, DOI:10.1080/03004279.2013.800576

Chambers, A. (1993). *Tell Me: Children, Reading & Talk*. New South Wales, Primary English Teaching Association

Clark, M. M. (2013) The Phonics Check for all Year 1 children in England: its background, results and possible effects. *Education Journal*. 4/26/2013, Issue 160, pp. 6-8.

Department for Education (DfE) (2013) *English programmes of study: key stages 1 and 2 National curriculum in England* London, DfE

Evans, J., Rich, E., Davies, B., & Allwood, R. (2008). *Education, disordered eating and obesity discourse: Fat fabrications*. Routledge.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2013). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Routledge.

Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1988). *Social Semiotics*. New York, Cornell University Press.

Kenway, J. and Bullen, E. (2001) *Consuming Children: Education-Entertainment-Advertising*. Buckingham, Philadelphia, Open University Press

Lambirth, A. (2003) 'They get enough of that at home': Understanding aversion to popular culture in schools. *Literacy*. 37 (1) p.9-13

Lingard, B (2005) Socially Just Pedagogies in Changing Times in *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 2005, vol 15, no 2

Livingstone, S. and Helsper, E. (2006) Does advertising literacy mediate the effects of advertising on children? A critical examination of two linked research literatures in relation to obesity and food choice. *Journal of Communication*, 56 (3) p. 560-84

Morgan, R. (1998) Provocations for a Media Education in Small Letters. In (ed) Buckingham, D. *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy*. London, Pennsylvania, UCL Press

Oates, C., Blades, M., Gunter, B., & Don, J. (2003). Children's understanding of television advertising: a qualitative approach. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 9(2), 59-71.

Owen, L., Auty, S., Lewis, C., & Berridge, D. (2007). Children's understanding of advertising: an investigation using verbal and pictorially cued methods. *Infant and Child Development*, 16(6), 617-628.

Reedy, D. (2012). Misconceptions about teaching reading: Is it only about phonics?. *Education Review*, 24(2).Robinson,

Robinson, M. (1997) *Children Reading Print and Television*. London, Falmer Press

Rosenblatt, L. (1938) *Literature as Exploration*. New York, Appleton-Century

Wyse, D 2010, 'Contextualised Phonics Teaching'. in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Learning to Read: Culture, Cognition and Pedagogy*. . Routledge